

Analyzing Virtual English Language Learning Environment with a Critical Lens

Ali Akbar Khomeijani Farahani¹, Mahboubeh Taghizadeh²

Department of Foreign Languages, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

¹farahani@ut.ac.ir; ²mah_taghizadeh@ut.ac.ir

Abstract-Although Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has become popular by discourse analysis researchers, it is rather rarely used by English language virtual instructors. The aim of the present paper is to explore some aspects of CDA suggested by [1, 2, 3] in the Iranian virtual learning environment. In order to carry out the study, we have observed three virtual English classes at Iran University of Science and Technology (IUST) to investigate how a number of indicators of Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework are manifested in terms of aspects of CDA in community of virtual instructors and students. Some of the results of the study indicated that: (1) students do not have power and freedom to choose what and when to study their materials and instructors who have the power in the class plan how virtual interactions should take place and how management and direction of such interactions should be carried out to ensure learning outcomes. They do not give any role of choosing the content, the pace and sequencing of learning material to their students and their classes are totally teacher-centered. (2) Affective aspects are considered important since they help to compensate for body language, facial expressions, and vocal intonations in text-based discussions, but the instructors who are in power do not make great use of conspicuous capitalization for emphasis, emoticons and repetitious punctuations in order to express their emotions. (3) Instructors, who consider themselves in the position of better information, when deciding on the sources of virtual classes, do not inject knowledge from diverse textbooks, articles and/or internet-based materials in each semester, they teach predetermined and old materials which are mostly based on Grammar Translation Method.

Keywords- Critical Discourse Analysis; Community of Inquiry Model; E-learning; Identity; Power

I. INTRODUCTION

CDA concerns itself with examining social context along the lines of ideology, identity, power, and inequality. It also illustrates how discourse affects the construction of “social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and belief”[1]. Distance education is also “a new, global technology-based education to facilitate easy, immediate learning and interaction for communicators, teachers and students in education programs” [3].

The focus of this study is (1) the analysis of virtual learning environment in terms of critical discourse analysis i.e., power, identity and ideology, and (2) to investigate how a number of indicators of Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework are manifested in community of virtual instructors and students with respect to their unequal status.

To this end, we analyzed the discourse of three virtual classes at Iran University of Science and Technology. A number of indicators of Community of Inquiry model are used as the framework of this study. We further make use of aspects of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how participants of this study incorporate the indicators of CoI model in their virtual learning community.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis concerns itself with examining social context along the lines of ideology, power and inequality. As [1] suggests, critical discourse analysis goes “beyond the formal structure of Language as an abstract system, toward the practical interaction of language and context”. In this sense, language is seen as a social practice and mode of action which is always socially situated “in a dialectical relationship with other facets of ‘the social’...it is socially shaped, but it is also socially shaping or constitutive” [2]. From this viewpoint, discourse is seen as constitutive of social reality in a general sense.

In this study, three major aspects of critical discourse analysis i.e., power, identity and ideology are taken into account. Below is some information related to them.

Drawing on [5] metaphor “culture is a verb”, [6] propose that “identity is a verb” suggesting that similar to culture, identity is something that people do. Reference [7] proposed that individuals do not choose and construct social identity alone, but rather that identity is co-constructed by all participants in a given interaction.

Power and dominance are the key concepts for critical discourse analysis (CDA) in looking at how people in hierarchically higher positions, majority groups, and organizations use and maintain power and control over other people and minority groups [1, 2, 8, 9]. Power and solidarity was a concept first presented by [10], and later extended by [11] in their model of politeness.

Reference [12] stresses the ideological significance of lexical choices and argues that “a text’s choice of wordings depends on, and helps to create, social relationships between participants”. Reference [13] also contends that the choice of different words for referring to the same thing by different speakers reveals “different ideological affiliations” on the part of the speakers.

B. E-learning

“E-learning” is a general term covering many different approaches that have much in common with the use of information and communication technologies. Learners have more choice of when and where to learn. This places a lot of responsibility on them while that in a traditional course is provided by its structure and the tutor. Online and e-learning, are sometimes used interchangeably and they are general terms covering a wide range of approaches[14].

E-learning gives the learners potentially more freedom to choose the place, pace and time of their learning. However, it does place more responsibility for learning on them and the

design of e-learning courses varies, so the degree of freedom will change from course to course [14].

Reference [15] believed that: e-learning will inevitably transform all forms of education and learning in the twenty-first century. Notwithstanding that e-learning's influence in traditional educational institutions has been weak-in reality, little more than an enhancement of current practices-as we gain a better understanding of its potential and strengths, e-learning will effectively transform how we approach the teaching and learning transaction.

C. E-learning in Iran

E-learning in Iran is still in its infancy stages and there are only a few online programs. There are some studies which also affirm the lack of coherent paradigm for e-learning education in Iran. Reference [16, 17] believed that the process of changing traditional education into a modern one in the Iranian society involves many critical problems. They summarized the problems as below:

- Lack of realistic comprehension concerning the process of learning;
- Ambiguous understanding about students' educational needs in different levels;
- Defective implementation of computer hardware and software;
- Weak IT education;
- Faint IT infrastructure;
- No realistic point of view or strategic program for higher education;
- Budget and equipment shortages;
- Influential atmosphere of political, social and economic situations;
- Lack of information literacy.

Reference [18] also argued that the developing e-learning systems could be considered as a solution for the hazy situation of online higher education in Iran. If e-learning is to have a meaningful role in higher education, it is important that universities focus on students' attitudes and their expectations with regard to the role of e-learning within their higher education experiences. E-learning represents an important, growing trend in the application of technology to facilitate student's learning in Iran.

D. Community of Inquiry

Reference [15] developed a model of a community of inquiry which combines three elements: cognitive presence, teaching presence and social presence. The Community of Inquiry (COI) framework reflecting the dynamic nature of higher-order learning has shown to be useful in guiding research and practice in online higher education [19]. It is grounded in a broad base of research in teaching and learning in higher education [20]. Community of Inquiry framework consists of a number of indicators.

Social presence can be classified through a series of indicators that fit into these categories: Affective, Open Communication, and Group Cohesion. The participants engage in a variety of behaviors in order to strengthen the social aspect of their community: expressing emotions, use of

humor and self-disclosure (Affective), risk-free expression, continuing a thread, quoting from others' messages, asking questions, complimenting and expressing appreciation and agreement (Open Communication), encouraging collaboration, vocatives, addresses or refers to the group, using inclusive pronouns and Phatics and Salutation (Group Cohesion).

There are three major categories of teaching presence (Design & Organization, Facilitating Discourse, and Direct Instruction). These are built through behaviors of: setting curriculum and methods, designing methods, establishing time parameters, utilizing medium effectively, establishing netiquette, making macro-level comments about course content (Design & Organization), sharing personal meaning, identifying areas of agreement/disagreement, seeking to reach consensus/understanding, setting climate for learning, drawing in participants, prompting discussion, assessing the efficacy of the process and Encouraging, acknowledging, or reinforcing student contribution (Facilitating Discourse), focusing discussion on specific issues, press content/questions, summarize the discussion, diagnose misconceptions, inject knowledge from diverse sources and Responding to technical concerns (Direct Instruction).

The indicators of cognitive presence include: Sense of puzzlement, Recognize problem (Triggering event category), Information exchange, Divergence, Suggestions, Brainstorming and intuitive leaps (Exploration category), Connecting ideas, Applying new ideas, Solutions, and Synthesis (Integration category) and Apply, Test and Defend (Resolution).

Among these indicators, some will be analyzed on the basis of some aspects of critical discourse analysis.

III. METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach to both data gathering and data processing is what [21] call an interpretivist qualitative approach by focusing on naturally-occurring discourse of three virtual classes.

In order to investigate aspects of CDA in virtual environment, we examined a corpus of three online graduate-level classes at the Iran University of Science and Technology. Total 90 students enrolled in the online General English language course which is a compulsory subject and is held fourteen sessions during a semester at this university. The students' fields were Industrial Engineering and Information Technology and their textbook is entitled "General English for Engineering Students".

A number of indicators of Community of Inquiry framework and three aspects of CDA (power, identity and ideology) provide the framework for the analysis of this study.

IV. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

In this section, a number of indicators of CoI model are discussed based on aspects of critical discourse analysis.

A. Social Presence

Self-disclosure is the least frequent indicator in the virtual center of this study. The instructors do not like to comment on their emotions and on disclosing things about themselves, their lives or present details of their lives and experiences out of class in their virtual communities. It shows that the instructors are attempting to be less intimate with their students.

Affective aspects are considered important since they help to compensate for body language, facial expressions, and vocal intonations in text-based discussions, but the instructors who are in power do not make greater use of conspicuous capitalization for emphasis, emoticons, and repetitious punctuations in order to express their emotions. In contrast, it is a strategy which is mostly used by virtual students. In this case, the students intend to express solidarity and emphasize in group status and group membership and try to express trust in the participants in virtual environment.

The students could easily ask their questions of the members of their virtual community and they typically but not always communicated in an online forum via text but not via audio. The instructors try to provide the answers orally and due to the lack of time, it is not possible for them to separately answer all the questions in written form. That is, through answering questions and making suggestions, they try to support and moderate the discussion.

Regarding quoting from others' messages indicator, the instructors refer to their students' posts. They try to construct a balanced and functional relationship among virtual students.

With regard to the Complimenting indicator, when students do their homework or when their replies to grammar and reading exercises are correct, the instructors try to praise their students with expressions such as "Great job! Keep up the good work!", "Well done" to help them feel comfortable in the virtual learning environment. They make use of compliments when they want to acknowledge that they are aware of their students' presence or when the students send their homework on time or when they answer grammar or reading exercises correctly.

The virtual instructors are aware of the functions of Phatics utterances in strengthening the community that the students are developing in that at the beginning of their classes, TEFL Instructors directly refer to their previous ideas and they recognize students by welcoming them into the class and acknowledging their first post. They also make use of statements like "Hi, how are you?" and "what's up? Do you have voice? Do you have image?" at the beginning of their class and expressions like, "Have a great weekend" and "If you do not have any question, cheer up and take care" at the end of their classes.

B. Teaching Presence

The students do not have power and freedom to choose what and when to study their materials and the instructors who have the power in the class plan how virtual interactions should take place and how management and direction of such interactions should be carried out to ensure learning outcomes. They do not give any right of choosing the content, the pace and sequencing of learning material to their students and their classes are totally teacher-centered. In order to show their authority in class and to clarify the rules and guidelines of virtual engagement, the instructors set up some boundaries on the students' interactions. For example, the students are asked not to interrupt when reading section is being taught or when the instructors are explaining a grammatical point.

The instructors communicate important date/time frames for learning activities at the beginning of the course to maintain the power and to help the students have an organized program to study during the classes. The students are informed that they need to complete the assignments and

submit them via email to their instructor during the specified time in virtual centers of the present study.

All teachers should be equally adept at using medium appropriately. Virtual instructors of the present study do not receive specific instruction in regard to teaching in virtual centers and they have different levels of computer and information literacy. This may threaten the power and identity of the instructors and their authority may be endangered in the class.

Sharing personal meaning indicator is relatively frequent in TEFL instructors' classes. The students could share their personal meanings although the primary focus is on presenting the material of predetermined syllabus. This would mean sharing power at some level with the students who are of the lower ranking and the instructors' awareness of students' needs will have their wants acknowledged and their values respected and shared.

Instructors, who consider themselves in the position of better information, when deciding the sources of virtual classes, do not inject knowledge from diverse textbooks, articles and/or internet-based materials in each semester; they teach predetermined materials which are mostly based on Grammar Translation Method. In this case, the instructors "do power" explicitly. Instead, Instructors who are in power should share a part of their power with their students and they should apply it more delicately to avoid consecutive problems.

Regarding students' technical concerns, the instructors try to be a facilitator and attentive because they try their best to solve the students' technical problems; for instance, in cases when student ask how they can get access to the file on the website, instructors guide them. But there are some specific technical problems that instructors cannot solve; for instance, when the students do not have voice or image of the virtual class. This may be a threat for the power of the instructors.

C. Cognitive Presence

Considering the Brainstorming indicator, the method adopted to teach the materials do not require brainstorming technique to be practiced in the class. Considering Divergence indicator, the students are allowed to offer supporting or contradictory ideas with regard to classroom activities and exercises. This is an acceptable strategy which de-emphasizes the power differential, avoids the overt enactment of power or authority and leaves the power relations untouched.

Although one of instructors' responsibilities in virtual environment is to be a facilitator who models critical discourse in the process of solving problem, the instructors of the present study do not make use of critical discourse and critical thinking methods in their classes to construct meaning and in this case they "do power" more explicitly.

In regards to Resolution category, the primary focus is on improving reading, grammar and vocabulary of students but speaking, listening and writing skills do not receive due attention in this system. Further, there is not specific speaking or listening activities in the materials and writing is limited to typing their answers to grammar and reading activities and questions. That is, the virtual classes are based on principles of Grammar Translation Method (GTM) which is one of the traditional ways of teaching English. In this method, the teacher holds the power and is the authority in the classroom.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This study aims to investigate what power relations and identity the superiors and subordinates try to establish in their communicative exchanges in virtual learning environment with respect to some of the indicators of Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework. It could be concluded that the indicators of Community of Inquiry model do not exist completely in virtual learning environment of the present study. In cases where the indicators of CoI model are relatively frequent, the instructors try to “do power” less explicitly and share power at some level with the students who are of the lower ranking. Also, they try to incorporate some indicators in their classes in order to de-emphasize the power differential and avoid the overt enactment of power or authority. On the other hand, a number of indicators are not available in virtual classes and consequently, in some instances, it could threaten the power and identity of the instructors.

Although power differences are maintained in virtual learning environment of the present study to a great extent, the difference does not obscure communication between the teacher (as the one who has power in the class) and the student. On the other hand, they help communication proceed smoothly without parties being required to prove their identities to each other. The person of high power (in educational context, i.e. the instructor) can find the opportunities to exercise his/her power less explicitly, which makes the environment more intimate and thus learning can happen easier. This implies that while the teacher is trying to downgrade its power position, simultaneously it is making use of its power to reach its goals, which is otherwise impossible.

REFERENCES

- [1] N. Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1992.
- [2] N. Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London, New York: Longman, 1995.
- [3] R. Fowler, On Critical Linguistics. In C. R. Caldas-Coulthard, and M. Coulthard (Eds.), *Texts and Practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis* (pp. 3–14). London: Routledge, 1996.
- [4] A. Isman, Z. Altinay, F. Dabaj and F. Altinay, Roles of the Students and Teachers in Distance Education, *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education-TOJDE*, vol. 5. 2004.
- [5] B. V. Street, Culture is a Verb. In D. Graddol, L. Thompson, and M. Byram (Eds.), *Language and Culture* (pp. 23–43) Clevedon: BAAL and Multilingual Matters, 1993.
- [6] C. Roberts, and S. Sarangi, Introduction: Negotiating and Legitimizing Roles and Identities. In S. Sarangi, and C. Roberts (Eds.), *Talk, Work and Institutional Order: Discourse in Medical, Mediation and Management Settings* (pp. 227–236). Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 1999.
- [7] J. Gumperz, Contextualization and Understanding, In Duranti A. and C. Goodwin (Eds.), *Rethinking Context* (pp. 229-252). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- [8] J. P. Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourse*, Second edition. London: Falmer, 1996.
- [9] J. P. Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- [10] R. Brown, and A. Gilman, The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity, *Style in Language*. Ed. Thomas A. Sebeok. New York: MIT, pp. 253-76, 1960.
- [11] P. Brown, and S. Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: CUP, 1987.
- [12] N. Fairclough, *Language and Power*. London: Longman, 1989.
- [13] M. Sykes, Discrimination in Discourse, in: T.A. Van Dijk (Ed.), *Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, vol. 4 (London, Academic Press), 1985.
- [14] A. Clarke, *E-Learning Skills*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- [15] D. R. Garrison, and T. Anderson, *Transforming and Enhancing University Teaching: Stronger and Weaker Technological Influences*, London: Kogan Page, 2000.
- [16] M. Dilmaghani, National Providence and Virtual Education Development Capabilities in Higher Education. *Virtual University Conference at Kashan Payam-e Noor College: Conference Proceedings*. Kashan: Payam-e Noor, 2003.
- [17] M. Noori, Traditional Education or Learning with Computer. *Virtual University Conference at Kashan Payam-e Noor College: Conference Proceedings*. Kashan: Payam-e Noor, 2003.
- [18] J. Yaghoubi, I. Mohammadi, H. Iravani, M. Attaran and A. Gheidi, Virtual Students' Perceptions of E-Learning in Iran, *TOJET*, 7(3), 1-7, 2008.
- [19] D. R. Garrison, and J. B. Arbaugh, Researching the Community of Inquiry Framework: Review, Issues, and Future Directions, *Internet and Higher Education*, 10(3), pp. 157-172, 2007.
- [20] D. R. Garrison, and T. Anderson, *E-Learning in the 21st Century*, London: Routledge Falmer, 2003.
- [21] Y. S. Lincoln, and E. G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, Inc, 1985.